

Gov. Herbert has little to say about 'spin' on Obamacare spending

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SALT LAKE CITY — Gov. Gary Herbert had little to say Thursday about the new claim that supporters of Medicaid expansion have misled Utahns about how much money the state is already getting through President Barack Obama's health care law.

"Well, it's certainly the first I've ever heard of that spin on the situation, so it's hard for me to comment on

something that nobody's really addressed to me directly," Herbert said during his monthly news conference on KUED Ch. 7.

On Tuesday, House Republicans were told in their caucus meeting that Utahns are paying less in taxes related to the Affordable Care Act, known as Obamacare, than is coming back to the state in the form of subsidies and other benefits.

Throughout the Medicaid expansion debate, the governor and other supporters have said the state needs to bring back the money Utahns are paying in taxes to Washington to fund Obamacare.

Earlier this month, Herbert said it was a "foolish option" for Utahns to have "all the pain of the tax without the benefit of what the taxes can be spent on, not only our economy, but in helping people with health care needs."

Thursday, he said "monies are fungible" and he needed to find out more about the new analysis produced for House Republicans by the Legislative Fiscal Analyst's Office.

"We have not been using bad numbers," the governor said. "In fact, everybody, until what evidently happened yesterday, has been agreeing with the numbers. There's been no dispute over the numbers."

It's not clear that Herbert will have much to add, at least not anytime soon.

He said the issue is one he doesn't "want to negotiate through the press" and suggested reporters "maybe ask me again a month from now, when I've had a chance to talk about that with leadership."

A source close to the administration told the Deseret News the governor will stay mum because "the numbers speak for themselves" and are not what Herbert and legislative leaders have agreed to in the past.

Calling consensus "critical through the entire process" of searching for a solution to Medicaid expansion, the source said, "on the numbers presented yesterday in caucus, there is not consensus."

The governor and the House GOP have been at odds over Medicaid expansion, with Herbert pushing for a plan to use some \$450 million available to the state annually to cover low-income Utahns including those who currently have no subsidies.

But his Healthy Utah proposal stalled in the House last session and, just last week, House Republicans soundly rejected what was supposed to be a compromise plan put together by the governor and GOP legislative leaders.

Herbert was careful Thursday not to criticize his fellow Republicans, instead focusing his frustration on the federal government and "the confusion, the complexity, and some of the nonsense" of the health care law.

"Let's not forget it's not just the executive branch negotiating with the House and the Senate," the governor said. "It's the executive branch and the House and the Senate negotiating with Washington."

He said the Obama administration needs to give Utah more flexibility on Medicaid expansion, particularly the ability to extend coverage only to Utahns earning less than the federal poverty level and still qualify for the maximum funding match.

"They could give us that little adjustment — and there's no reason under the law why they can't do it — and we have something resolved tomorrow," the governor said. That request, however, has been repeatedly denied.

Herbert had hoped to resolve Medicaid expansion in time to call lawmakers into special session this month. Now, though, the issue will wait until the 2016 Legislature begins meeting in late January.

And there's increasing talk that it could be put on hold until a new president is elected in November 2016, particularly if voters chose a Republican willing to either do away with Obamacare or at least give states more flexibility.

University of [Utah political](#) science professor Matthew Burbank said the governor likely doesn't want to antagonize the House Republicans by confronting their claims about the federal health care dollars coming and going from Utah.

"It's better politics to blame the federal government and blame a Democratic president than the people want to try to make a deal with," Burbank said. "I think it might be a case of picking your battles."

RyLee Curtis, Utah Health Policy Project senior policy analyst, said what the new analysis for House Republicans doesn't show is both the Utahns who have been waiting for health care for three years as well as the money available to help them.

None of the \$730 million the analysis shows coming back to the state goes toward providing health care for the 63,000 Utahns earning below the federal poverty level who are in the so-called coverage gap.

"You're leaving money on the table and you're leaving lives on the table," Curtis said.

Other topics the governor discussed Thursday included his decision to speak at the World Congress of Families IX, the subject of a protest rally in the Capitol rotunda Wednesday by an LGBT advocacy group that attracted about 15 people.

"I speak to a lot of different conferences and conventions that come to Utah as governor," Herbert said. "We don't all agree on everything so it's appropriate for the governor to go to this organization and say, 'Welcome to the state of Utah.'"

He also reiterated his support for the death penalty in light of new interest in reconsidering it among some conservative lawmakers. The governor said capital punishment should be for heinous crimes.

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